

On the Road. London, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels.

In 1994, as an art student, I had my grant money in the bank and, for the first time in my life I could afford to go across the channel to continental Europe.

I was 41 and had never been abroad. I had lived all 41 years within the United Kingdom and most of that within England but going to university as a mature student had temporarily lifted me out of poverty and opened up the possibility of travel.

I had missed the trip to Rome in the first year because I dithered about counting the pennies and worrying about the consequences of spending my grant and possibly leaving myself destitute and homeless when I got back to England.

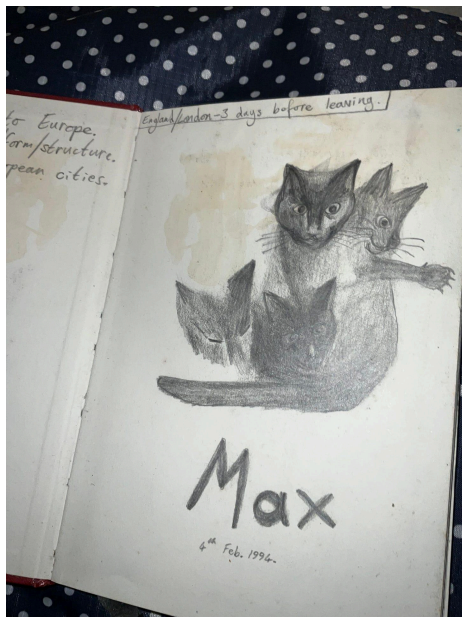
In the second year of the course though, I had calculated every eventuality and I felt ready to take the plunge.
I wrote a plan for the course module.

In the first version I would take a video camera and make a road movie.

I had to rethink that plan though because the university wouldn't allow me to take one of their video cameras abroad.

In the second version of the plan it would be a travelling sketchbook of London, Paris, Amsterdam and Brussels.

Here's a sketch I did in London of Alby's cat Max, 3 days crossing the channel.



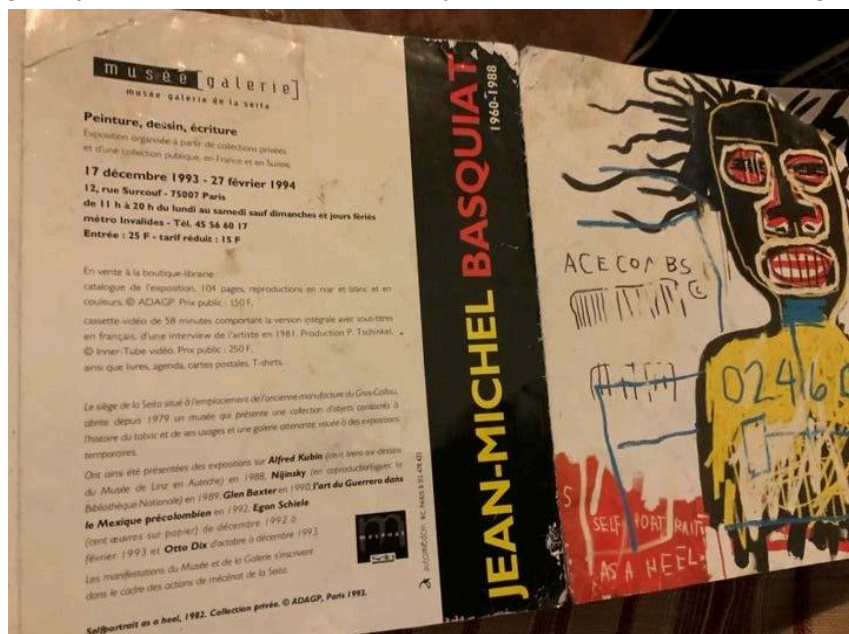
The first stop on my journey was Paris.

I went by Eurolines coach, crossing the channel by ferry. Britain was in the European Union then so I didn't necessarily need a passport but I got one anyway, just in case.

The Euro had not yet been adopted as the official European Union currency so the money in France was still the Franc.

I got no sleep on the coach and was exhausted when I arrived in Paris in the middle of the night. I wandered around the streets. When the sun came up I went to some galleries. I was exhausted.

I went to this exhibition of Jean-Michel Basquiat. I was so tired I fell asleep sitting in the gallery and when I woke up a party of school children were laughing at me.



I booked in at the Y.H.A. network hostel, put my baggage in a locker and went out, still baggy eyed and trying to stay awake. I went to all the various places where you have to go on your first day in Paris, the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, Montmartre etc.

We didn't have mobile phones in those days and I couldn't afford a digital camera. Digital cameras were new and expensive. Even the university art department only had two digital cameras. Most people had never even heard of them.

Of course I couldn't take an analogue camera because I'm vegan and camera film contains gelatine.

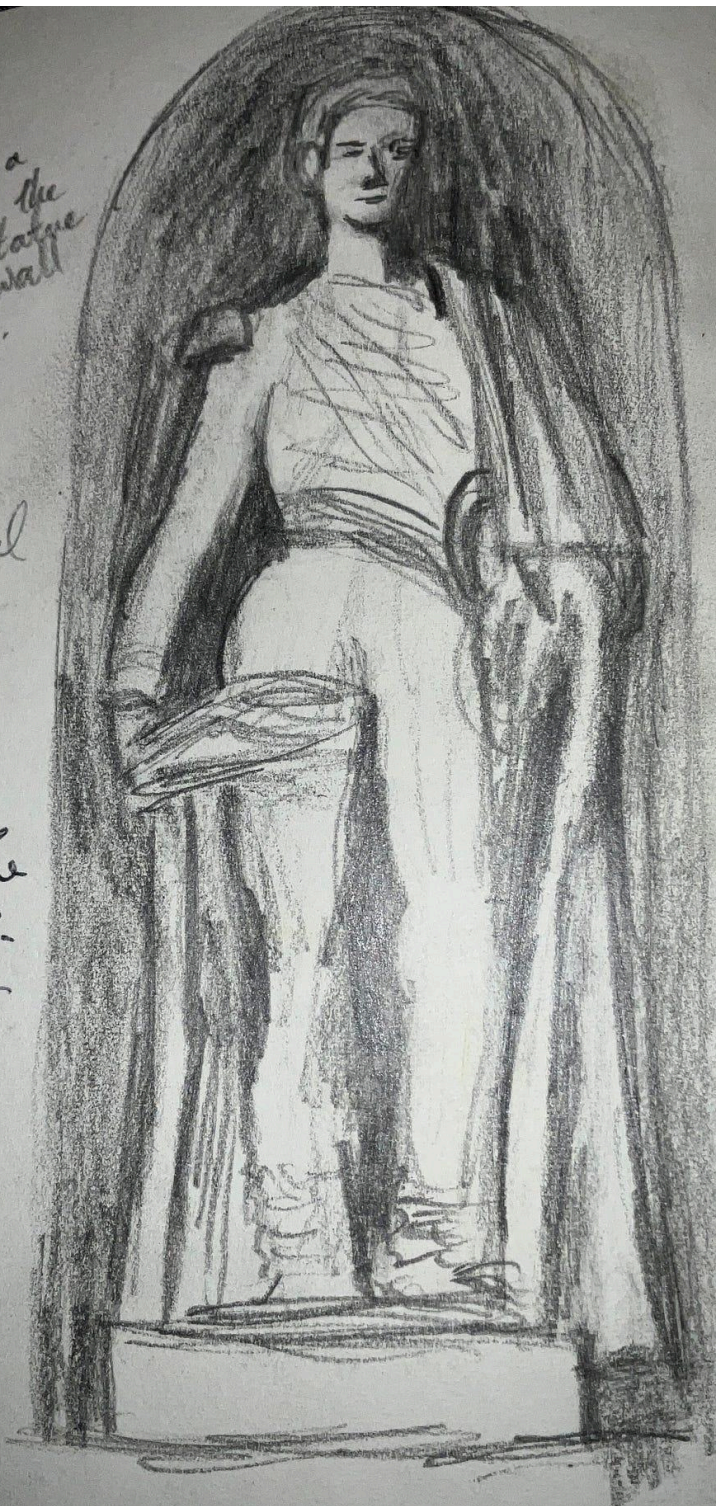
So the sketchbook would have to do, The first few sketches I drew were banal. It was february in Paris and very cold. I wish I could claim that my drawing improved greatly as the journey went on but, the truth is, the drawing I did of Max the cat in a nice warm flat in London was the best of the collection. My drawing did improve a tiny bit as I travelled on but not greatly.

Look at these lackluster efforts:

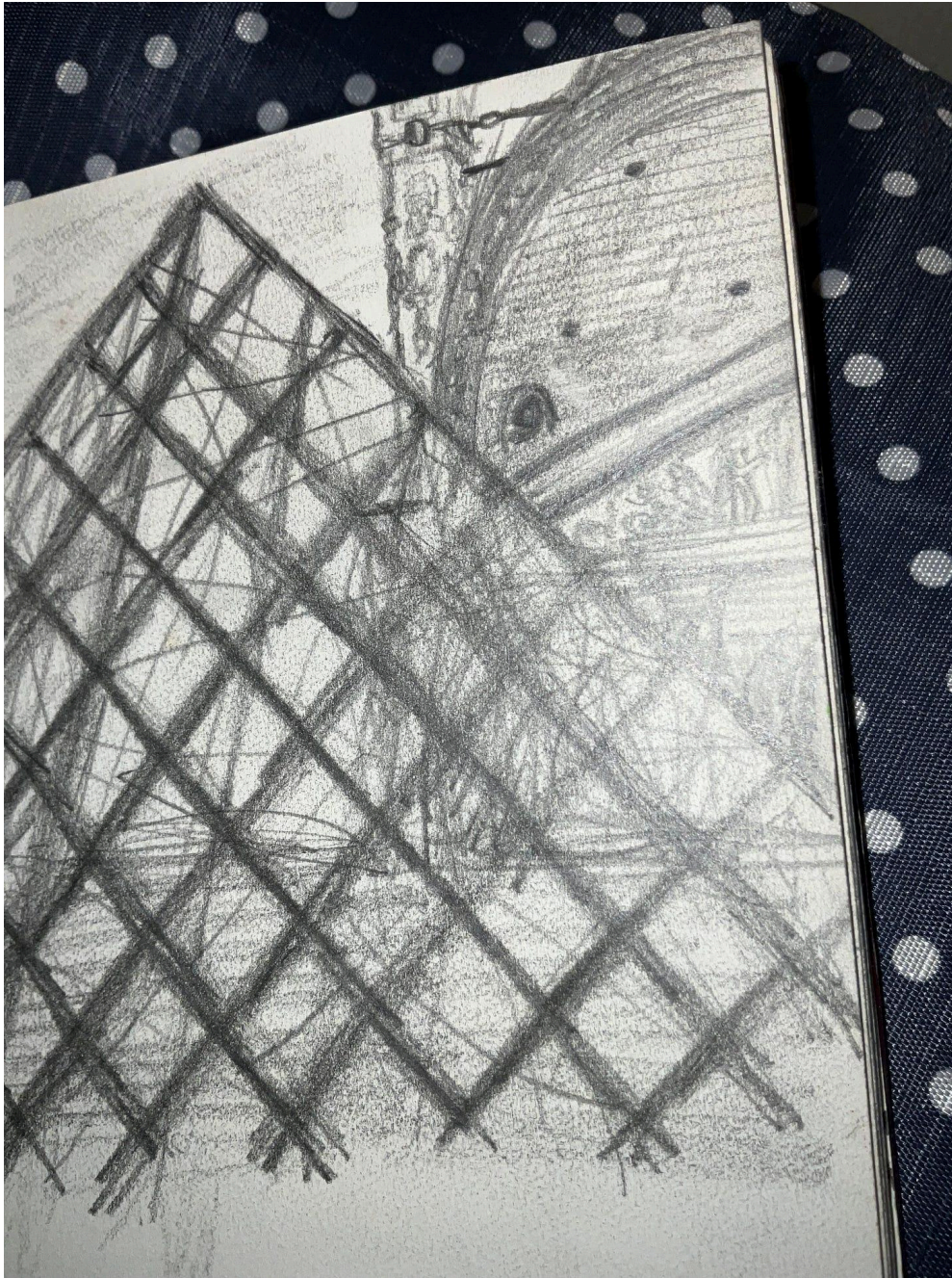


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I was trying to find a theme and the only thing I was coming up with was the old and the new and Europe looking in two directions like Janus.

I was in Paris for nine days.

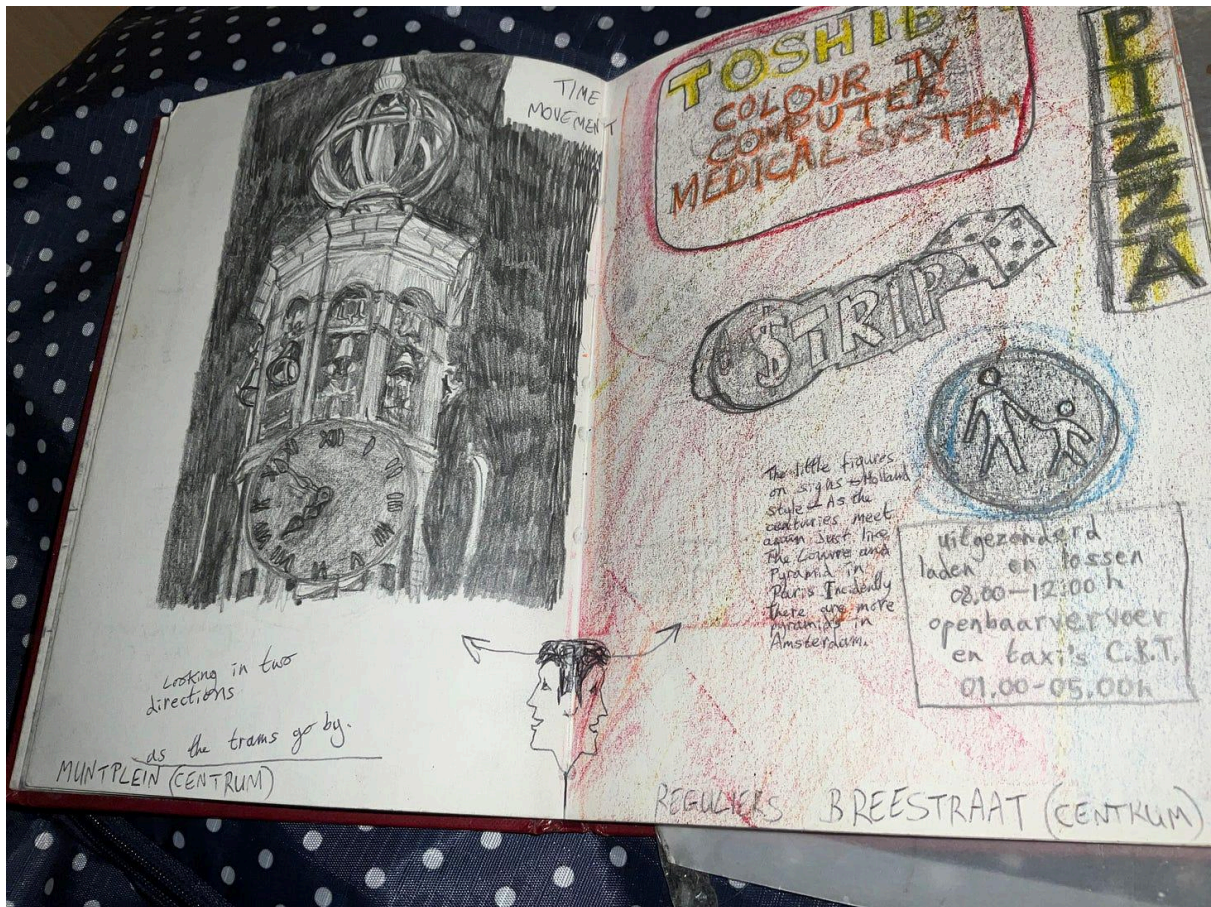
In the hostel a lot of young people from South America arrived. There was a strange brightly coloured insect on the wall next to my bed. It didn't look like it belonged to wintertime Paris so I guessed it had probably come from South America on someone's bag.

I got a painful rash on the back of my legs, on my calves. I bought ointment and bandages it was so bad.

I was feeling happy to be exploring places I had previously only heard about but I was a little bit upset that my drawing skills were turning into crap.

I did go to a good concert by a Breton folk rock band called Fourquette Me Note.

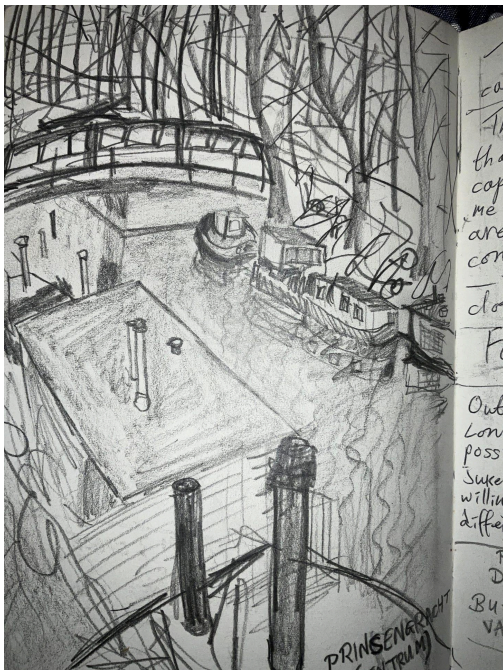
The next place on my itinerary was Amsterdam.



This picture was on the Janus theme, looking in two directions at Reguliersbreestraat, Centrum, Amsterdam.

And here's my sketch of St. Francis Xavier Church at Singel:

I was getting a bit depressed with some of these which are poor quality.



I found the Amsterdam culture very surprising.

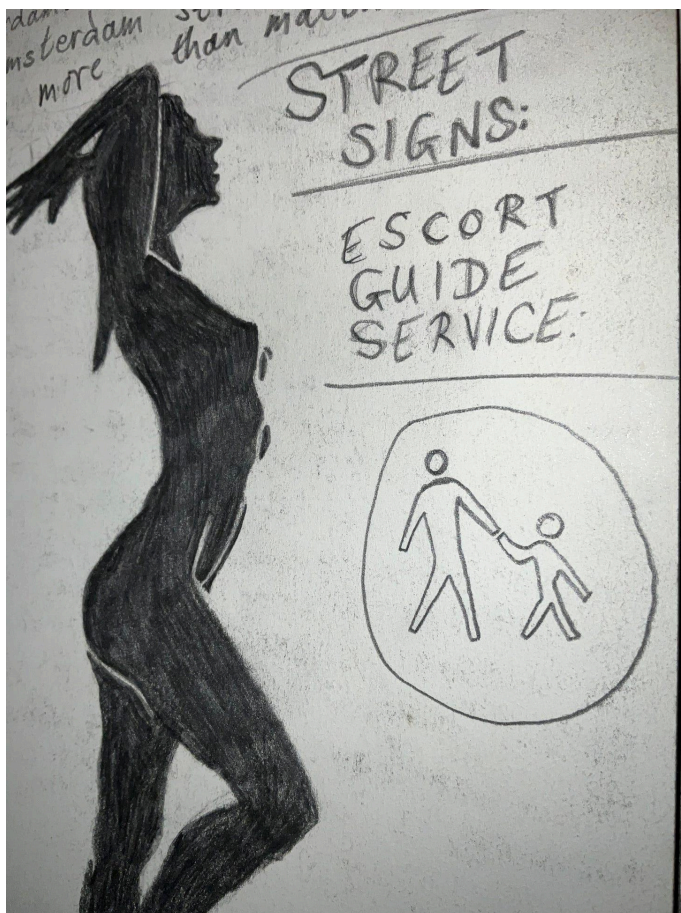
Language wise I had struggled a bit with my poor abilities in French and I knew almost nothing of Dutch. I saw a bookshop called "The American Bookshop" and went in there to buy an English-Dutch translation dictionary. To my amazement they didn't have any and the American staff in the shop were acting as though the idea of a Dutch translation dictionary had never even crossed their minds.

On the positive side of things I found that Dutch cafés could do a mug of tea the English way, proper builders' tea, so strong you could stand the spoon up in it. This was a matter of great joy to me after Paris and the Salon De Thé experience.

Also there were vegetarian cafés. Vegetarian cafés were hard to find in Paris but Amsterdam was a bit more civilised.

Of course there were also those other items in Amsterdam cafés, the quasi-legal (or at least permitted) use of cannabis. Cannabis isn't one of my vices. I've tried it but I wasn't impressed. I don't particularly like alcohol or coffee either, but tea, oh my goodness I do love tea!

I'm also asexual so this sort of thing on Amsterdam street signs wasn't for me. I thought it was funny to see the little signs of the adult and child juxtaposed with the signs advertising "escorts".



After a few days in Amsterdam I moved on to Brussels, foolishly thinking that the central city of the E.U. would be all bright lights and excitement.
Ha! I was very much mistaken.

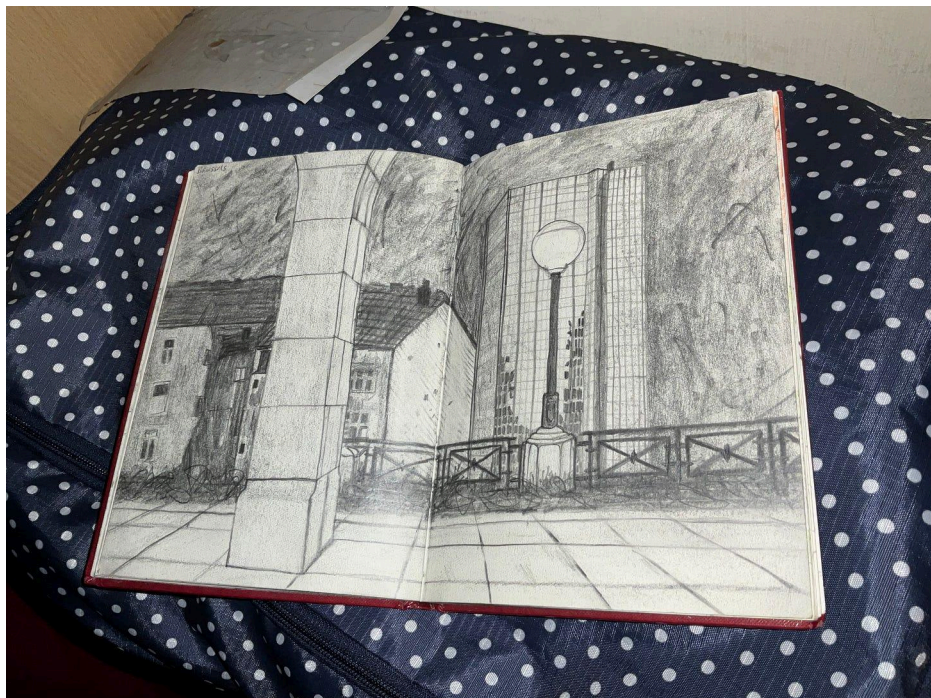
Brussels was like the stereotype of a northern English town. Men with flat caps and whippets playing darts in the pubs, pomme frites on sale near shops for stamp collectors, beer mat collectors and other hobbyists. The whole town began to shut down at about ten each evening because people had to be up for work, or possibly stamp collecting and whippet racing, in the morning.

Like all visitors, probably, Belgian ways of pronouncing French very confusing to me and the dual language, Flemish and French, road signs but I was getting into it.
I went to visit two art students who had been at the same art school as me for one year when they were on the exchange programme.

Then I met them again the next day at their own art school. They invited me to come to meet a bunch of their friends at their favourite café in the evening. When I went they used my poor knowledge of French to trick me into paying for everyone else's food and drinks.
Consequently I was then nearly broke and had to use money from a credit card to get back to England. I didn't really want to use the credit card because the monthly fees make it a lot more expensive than using a debit card to spend my actual money.

Anyway I'd been suckered and I nearly got stranded abroad but I managed.

Here's a drawing I did in Brussels of two different scenes joined into one, with a shiny tower block and some crumbling old houses:



Back in England I did this sketch of some places in London, combined into one:



And then I got back to Exeter.

The bit of Exeter I was living in at that time was Topsham. Here's a sketch of Topsham:

